

The Rhetoric of Weaving and Healing: Women's Work in Interwar Hungary, a Failed Anti-Democratic Utopia

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The Rhetoric of Weaving and Healing: Women's Work in Interwar Hungary, a Failed Anti-Democratic Utopia

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Hungary as a *Volksnation* was reaffirmed by the Treaty of Trianon (1920) which left Hungary with the urgent need to redefine the concept of citizenship. To redefine the role of women in the new Hungary the conservative political elite revived the concept of 'cottage industry' as a possible solution for both the pressing economic needs of women to seek for employment and as a response to the concept of the independent, wage-earning 'New Woman'. The metaphor of Hungary as a sick mutilated body after 1920 opened up space for possible alternative definitions of women's role as healers for the first generations of university graduates. The example of women doctors shows the impossibility of harmonizing the rhetoric of employment with women's duties in the family. However, due to the Great Depression the concept of 'bread-winning woman' started to shed its ennobled connotation as wider social strata of women had to start some wage-earning activity. Those female professionals who were not satisfied with the neo-conservative vision of women's employment in cottage industry – employment till marriage if it did not threaten the male-bread-winner model – nor with the alternative version offered by the social democratic and the communist party, found empowerment in the rhetoric of exceptionalism: e. g., exceptional times not only allow but require a select stratum of women to enter the labour force. The rhetoric of women doctors about their profession proves that healing and caring was the self-image appropriated by the first generation of female professionals and that it necessarily pushed them to the extreme right. Analysis of the female membership of the Hungarian Nazi Party, the Arrow Cross Party, shows an over-representation of intellectual women among its members. In this chapter I aim to map varying trends that went to form the 'rhetoric of work' in the special context of the 'Trianon trauma', pointing out the factors which shifted the definition of women's work towards radically racialized body politics.

A tanulmány célja, hogy az I. világháború utáni a magyar női munkavállalás retorikájának változásain keresztül mutassa be, hogyan kapcsolódott a fájvédő politika női mobilizációjához. A magyar állam, mint Volksnation meghatározása a Trianoni békeszerződés traumája határozta meg éppen úgy, mint az állampolgárság fogalmát. A területében lezsugorodott Magyarországon a konzervatív politikai elit a nők szerepét a háziipar elméletének és gyakorlatának felélesztésével oldotta meg, mely egyszerre jelentett a folyamatos női elszegényedés és férfiak versenytársának kikiáltott önálló munkavállaló „új nő” figurájával szemben alternatívát. A trianoni traumai biológizáló feldolgozása, azaz, a magyar országrészeknek, mint amputált testrészeknek a meghatározása lehetőséget nyitott a női szerep átfogalmazására a nyilvános térben, mint gyógyító. A női orvosok megbukott kísérlete, hogy családi kötelezettségek, és a munkavállalás harmonizálják, bizonyítja a „női különlegességre” épülő munkavállalási retorika kudarcát. A Nyilaskeresztes Párt női tagjainak elemzésén keresztül bemutatom, hogy a fizetett női munkavállalásnak, mint „gondoskodás és gyógyítás a különleges helyzetben” meghatározása szükségszerűen sodorta a nőket a szélsőjobboldali politikai mobilizáció felé, melyet saját érdek érvényesítésük érdekében felhasználtak.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I want to connect women's political mobilization with the conservative attempts at redefining Hungarian citizenship after 1920 through revival of weaving (cottage industry) and defining healing as a female duty¹. The turmoil following the lost World War I brought about a major transformation in all spheres of Hungarian life as Hungary lost two thirds of her formal territory in the peace treaty signed at the castle of Trianon in a suburb of Paris in 1920. The Horthy regime (1919-1944) emerged from the ruins of the Habsburg Dual Monarchy and expected to redefine Hungary's place in Europe. This regime was born through foreign intervention and with the legacy of the two failed revolutions (bourgeois and Bolshevik) of 1918 and of 1919.

The neo-conservative Hungarian politicians recognized the challenge when, owing to the armistice with the *Entente*, due to pressure from the armistice a highly select group of Hungarian women were given the right to vote in 1920. General suffrage, Act I, of 1918 was not implemented because of the civil war². In 1930, 27% of the population was enfranchised in Hungary, the percentage having decreased from 40% in 1921, while in other European countries the number of franchised increased during that period. This is one of the major political problems discussed in the present chapter.

The other sphere which was transformed radically was public discourse on women's paid employment. The shock of women's admission to the public space as citizens, voters and active agents in the short-lived 133-day Soviet republic (21 March 1919 - 1 August 1919) raised the question for conservative Hungary led by Admiral Horthy (1868-1957) of how to channel women's activity into a 'regime-conforming' conserva-

tive women's movement. This conservative redefinition of women's work happened through reinventing the domestic loom with the active participation of the conservative women's organizations³. This also explains the revival of 'imaginary' Hungarian motifs via needlework and dress codes in interwar Hungary. Symbolically, through this specific form of women's work – weaving – the mutilated parts of the country were expected to reunite with the body of the nation.

Following analysis of the weaving industry, the other case study in this chapter regards the formation of racialized body politics in Hungary: how women doctors interpreted the meaning of their healer's profession as healing the sick body of the nation. The essentialist standpoint on biological difference, following the typology of Yuval-Davis and Anthias which defined five steps to how women can and do participate in ethnic and national processes⁴, necessarily subordinated women (and women doctors) to the war aims and the rhetoric of motherhood. This study analyses how the conservative and anti-modernist gender discourse on work in interwar Hungary framed the different branches of the women's movement and how these frames, by not being homogeneous, gave scope for different political interpretations, which in this case shifted the 'women's elite' of Hungary towards support of the extreme political right-wing⁵.

Under the Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös (1886-1936), new political trends emerged from the 1930s on, due to the increasing influence of the fascist political rhetoric of 'national unity'. Under the politics of Gömbös, the representatives of the 'new guard' no longer tried to achieve the 'conservative utopia' of pre-1914 times but rather imagined a new Hungary focusing on health as national hygiene. Women doctors allowed themselves to get caught up in this shift towards Nazism and racist hygiene. Between the rhetoric of equality typifying liberal feminism and the social democrats and the neo-conservative rhetoric of motherhood there was a dangerously narrow path which women doctors now trod when they agreed to label their profession a 'mission'.

The chapter ends by analyzing the professional background of the female members of the Arrow Cross Party, the first modern political mass party in Hungary, where I point out the rhetorical problems relating to women's paid employment.

DEFINITION OF HUNGARY AS A SICK BODY

In the post-World War I context the reconstruction of the country required the women's role in the public arena to be redefined⁶. As described by Jenő Herczeg (1886-1961), a conservative journalist and writer:

The Great Ladies of pre-war times performed their duties as best they could... If we are now beaten, torn apart, robbed it is not the fault of the great ladies of pre-war times⁷.

The tradition of "Great Ladies", the neo-conservative and 'good-old-pre-1914-times' nostalgic elite in the Hungarian women's movement found itself especially caught be-

tween political pressure from the left (social democrats, communists) and the extreme right (fascist, Arrow Cross movements), not to mention economic and social pressure due to increasing female employment. The question explored in this section is how the Hungarian political elite was to narrate burgeoning female employment after 1920: as a mission, as a necessity or as an earned privilege?

The post-World War I social climate in Hungary saw increasing impoverishment of the middle and lower-middle classes. The Hungarian middle class could not avoid giving their own interpretation to the slow but visible increase in female participation in the labour force. Of the employed women in Hungary in 1941, 43.9% were peasants, 19.4% industrial workers, 28.1% domestic workers, 12% free lance and 6.6% civic servants⁸. The increase in female employment was explained differently by contemporaries; the general argument was that “the woman is motivated to have a paid job by the low income of the male breadwinner or her own increased demands for life”⁹. The first part of this argument – lack of sufficient income – is ‘socially’ acceptable but several proposals were worked out to eliminate this reasoning. Women should not take jobs from men, because this might destroy the life of another family. Descendants of respectable families might look for employment but the real ‘lucky sisters’ were those who need not work at all¹⁰. The values and rhetoric of domesticity in mainstream public discourse were stronger than the values of economic independence due to paid employment. That is one of the reasons why employment is narrated in the frame of respectability and moral order, and not in the frame of economic efficiency.

The rhetorical frame of women’s paid employment as an economic and emancipational necessity was taken up by the left-wing parties and the feminists and clashed with the moral definition of work. So the ‘mission-frame’ open to women had a sacral and a de-sacralised version. In this section I analyze the different ‘mission-frames’ defining women’s work in interwar Hungary.

The origin of the sacralised version of the ‘mission-frame’ in Hungary is strong political Catholicism. Political Catholicism in its most powerful form became the main supporter of the Horthy regime. As the first female member of the Hungarian Parliament, a Christian feminist, Margit Slachta (1884-1974), said in her first speech on election to the Hungarian Parliament in 1920:

The camp of Christian women stands united and disciplined behind the Christian parliament; it does not want to show up or to shine but to offer a sacrifice at the altar of the nation¹¹.

She was the first who spoke as a female politician about the “mission of sacrifice” by women in the Parliament instead of the “profession” of women.

A new type of women’s associations, the post-suffrage organizations, was founded after World War I. They were based on political discourse with the main emphasis on exaggerated patriotism and irredentism. The quasi-sacral mission of ‘nation protection’

was the point which brought together the conservative upper-middle class with the religious and fascist lower-middle class at the eve of World War II¹². The scapegoat for the situation was everything which was 'Other', 'non-Hungarian'. In this anti-liberal era the liberal feminist women's movement was also blamed. The defenders of the nation's body must be women alone.

We Hungarian women are the only ones who are determined that these illnesses of the body of the nation will be cured in us and through us¹³.

The other 'mission-frame' concerning women's work was the fight to restore the 'lost lands' of Hungary: territorial revanchism. This also served the public purpose of women's mobilisation in an over-politicized climate. Using women to fight for revanchism had several advantages: the stereotypical female characteristics such as emotionalism, and irrationality could be well employed in such a cause which also tried to create a 'respectable' version of politics for women¹⁴.

The other political movement which was constructed as a 'respectable' response to the challenges of modern time was the legitimist women's movement, fighting for restoration of the Habsburg monarchy in Hungary. The legitimist women's movement attracted wide social support and created consensus among different conservative women's organizations, such as the Pro Hungaria World Association of Hungarian Women, or the Sacred Crown Association of Hungarian Women. The latter was a special female section of the Sacred Crown Association of Hungarian Men¹⁵. These organizations had a great public impact especially through the newspapers and the widely circulating allusions to the grand old peaceful days of pre-1914 times. Legitimism was not an acceptable ideological cause on the level of 'great politics' because of international pressure against the restoration of the Habsburg Empire, but it was used to counterbalance the radical fascist right, which also desired to increase its political influence over the Hungarian women's movement. Legitimism was quarantined by the women's associations since they offered an acceptable movement, following the traditional dichotomy of "woman with tears, man with blood", to defend the Homeland¹⁶.

The other, 'quasi-sacral' political response to the Trauma of Trianon and to the increasing participation of women in public life was the formation of the Hungarian Women's National Association (MANSZ). The MANSZ was an umbrella organization for all Hungarian women's organizations founded by Cecile Tormay, as a reaction to the social democratic and communist mobilization of women in 1919. In the statutes of the Hungarian Women's National Association (MANSZ) they declared:

The Association incorporates all Hungarian women, Catholic or Protestant, who insist on Christian belief and love their Hungarian nation. Nothing else was required from the members but that they should not be influenced by demagogic agitators, but demand courageously and persistently that their representative should be a good Christian Hungarian person and a member of that party which is fighting for Christian ideas¹⁷.

The 'quasi-sacral mission frame' of women's mobilization was directed against non-Christians and those who demanded change, i.e. 'agitators'. The National Alliance of Hungarian Women (MANSZ) managed to protect suffrage rights based on educational and economic census against the left- and right-wing attempts at opening up against both leftist and right-wing attempts. During the debate about the election law in 1938 feelings intensified and the extreme right-wing political groups grew stronger¹⁸. Evidently the cultural and political hegemony of the pre-1918 elite was questioned for increasing women's political and economic mobilization.

The mainstream neo-conservative Hungarian women's movement inevitably found its public space as a fighter for 'national aims'¹⁹. Gentile upper-class Hungarian women shifted more and more to the right. The definition of the nation was Hungarian, Christian; all other elements were harmful and alien. Increasing corporatist state intervention and the rhetoric of a sick body opened a window of opportunity for political action by women. The body of the nation needed protection and if the men failed then women should do their bit. It was only one rhetorical step from here to defining the cause of the sickness and the suggested remedy as an Anti-Semitic discourse. However that road led to a dead end: towards institutionalized racial discrimination.

A CONSERVATIVE UTOPIA: WOMEN'S POLITICAL MOBILIZATION VIA WEAVING AS WOMEN'S WORK

Why would a women's organization organize a national campaign to distribute looms in Hungary, in 1926, when the country was already invaded with cheap textile products? This "romantic vision of pre-industrial times"²⁰ prevailed in the main women's organization's attitude towards women's employment. Post-World War I international circumstances made construction of an internal labour market a political necessity. As Patrick Joyce pointed out, the "labour process is rightly seen as inherently about production and mediations of meaning"²¹. The celebrated products of cottage industry and intellectuals' romanticizing village life as an untouched clean "repository for the national essence"²² served two purposes in interwar Hungary. One aim was to counter-balance the 'sinful city' as a symbol of modernization and to create a conservative rhetorical space for women's economic and political mobilization. The aim of the MANSZ was to eliminate foreign goods from the Hungarian textile market with the help of women weaving at home; though this was not achieved, the cult of 'real home made Hungarian textiles' was constructed.

The reasons why the leadership of the MANSZ, the umbrella organization of women's organizations, picked up cottage industry as a pretext for mobilization and especially chose weaving as a mobilization activity were not only the existing tradition of cottage industry in the women's movement. The 'imagined' origin of cottage industry went back to the Huns, to the imagined nomadic and temporarily successful ancestors of

the Hungarians²³. According to this historical discourse the custom of women doing needlework was handed down through the nobles' castles to the peasant women who preserved it from the dangers of modernization while the country was under a foreign yoke²⁴.

Hungarian women of old wove bright patterns while waiting back home for those who were in war, or imprisoned, those whom they loved most. Today that which the Hungarian woman loves most is again far away, suffering in captivity: the old, undivided homeland! They do not let them return: Transylvania, the Upper land, the south and the north. And again we are waiting. Waiting is the destiny of women! But as they waited, looking at the sea of desert, the Hungarian women learned that they should not weave only for their own household, but for all who are Hungarian, orphans, homeless students, the sick and suffering. They learned not to use fine silk thread, but that which befits a strong nation, strong twine, as long as they are waiting, waiting for the return of what they love most: the return of Greater Hungary²⁵.

In this context weaving and sewing were used as metaphors of creation: re-knitting the torn fabric of the country, reconstructing the country. The origin of folk art allegedly went back to the noble castles, to the Hungarian nobility conquering the Carpathian basin. This argument not only supported the political claim of the Hungarian aristocracy to political leadership in the Carpathian basin but also narrowed down the options in the face of other forms of modernization based on equality and democracy.



Fig. 1
Cecile Tormay in Miskolc on 15 May 1926, photo from "Magyar Jövo".

Women's employment in cottage industry was expected to serve the Hungarian economic revival and create a network for women's political mobilization. Confident in this 'conservative utopia', the MANSZ initiated an exhibition of women's domestic work in 1926²⁶. The journal of this very influential women's organization, "*Magyar Jövő*" [Hungarian Future] defined the aim of the exhibition as "securing the hegemony of the Hungarian nation in the field of culture and the economy"²⁷. The slogan of the exhibition: "The spinning wheel is clicking, the Hungarian Nation is weaving its future"²⁸, clearly shows how in the case of cottage industry the "right-wing ideology and its successful appropriation of ideological motifs such as 'freedom' and 'nation' has sensitized to the social construction of meaning"²⁹. In the thinking behind the exhibition the image of the ideal future was combined with economic production as cultural value production. Hungarian women's work was here defined exclusively by 'crafts-woman-ship' in sewing and weaving. The end products, such as colourful tablecloths and linen wares were displayed in the form of an exhibition. The point was to underline that 'Hungarian' women are doing 'work' defined as 'Hungarian work'. This type of work had nothing to do with paid employment outside the home, neither with industry nor with the service sector. This rhetorical definition coincided with a moment of Hungarian history when most of the female work force was employed either as domestic servants or industrial workers.

The exhibition of Hungarian cottage industry products was opened in Miskolc on 15 May 1926. The organizers put looms in the exhibition with women weaving 'Hungarian linen' for the great joy of the respectable visitors arriving for the occasion in Miskolc. Opinion-leaders among the aristocratic women took an active part in organizing the event. The wife of Admiral Horthy herself set up a domestic workshop in her residence in Buda castle, where "working women" produced "Hungarian dresses with distinctly Hungarian motives". Another aristocrat, Countess Rafaelné Zichy, brought to this Miskolc exhibition carpets and tablecloths from her own workshop that she had set up in Sárszentmihály. Each city, village or region tried to produce or rather invent its special "national" product³⁰. After the exhibition the activists in the women's organisation took a prominent role in distributing these looms throughout the country.



Fig. 2
Poster showing parts being chopped off Hungary. Scissors are cutting off Transylvania.

The third aim of the exhibition was to link several independent women's associations into a quasi mass organization through the very act organizing the exhibition. The local branches of the MANSZ organized local exhibitions for their own products which were also visited by the national leadership of the MANSZ. This resulted in a new women's movement, creating possible space and channels for governmental influence in fighting against political pressure coming from left and right to redefine women's work in the political arena, though this was swept away by the Great Depression. In the domestic workshop patriarchy remained unquestioned: it offered a pretext for "re-ordering of gender relations from above"³¹ and defined moral order. The work, which was also women's work, was "forming codes of symbolic meaning"³² in order to express what the ideal society should look like. The weaving workshop rested on an imaginary conservative utopia though.



Fig. 3
Sándor Nagy, *Hungaria*, tempera on wood, 1930, Hungarian National Gallery FK 2128.

THE BODY POLITICS OF TRIANON: WOMEN WHO HEAL

The new Horthy regime failed to establish any "new canon of knowledge" about the loss and separation of the different parts of the country³³. But it used the rhetorical creation of a mythology³⁴ to rationalize political events. The sickness metaphor is used at turning points of society and Horthy Hungary used new corporeal images to express the changing relationship. The Treaty of Trianon was interpreted as a mutilation as the Entente forces chopped off Hungary's arms and legs, leaving the body of the nation intact³⁵.

The Horthy regime had to adapt to the transformation in gender politics: in 1920 women received limited suffrage³⁶ while the female employment rate increased steadily. The female body was used as a political metaphor in the public discourse to express the broken relationship between the different parts of the nation. The body of Hungary mutilated by the *Entente* powers was the reason the memory of Trianon was constructed upon a geographical frame: visually the viewer was reminded of the loss of “country parts”. As one of the MANSZ activists declared:

Only we, the Hungarian women, have the mission that these sicknesses will be cured in us and through us in the body of the nation³⁷.

“Linguistic communities organized around specific concepts” have “temporal aspects”³⁸. In this case the job, they claimed, was to be performed by female doctors alone as a precondition for the bodily revival of the nation. In this section I will analyze how the rhetoric of self-definition of this new social group of women doctors developed within the frame of harmonizing family and employment via defining female doctors as healers of the ‘nation’. This argument – using the special mission of women as healers in exceptional times, and appropriating a traditional discourse to legitimize their non traditional role – was only one way³⁹.

In 1895 the University of Medicine was opened to women in Hungary. By 1942 there were already 679 women doctors registered in Budapest. Out of the total of 1207, 54% of the female doctors were married, while 61.7% of the male doctors were married⁴⁰. Studying to become a doctor was a ‘noble activity’, a proper activity for daughters of the impoverished middle class. This education also increased the possibility of a good marriage. However the professional and social expectations clashed here. The female doctors were expected to be employed till they got married, and then they were expected to withdraw and to work only for their families. The fascist rhetoric helped to solve this dilemma when Eszter Kokas, founding president of MOOE (Hungarian Association of Women Doctors), made a study trip to fascist Italy, where she was told:

Women’s work is utterly indispensable to the life of the state, because there are territories which can be properly serviced by women, so they should be steered in that direction. Their opinion is that women’s nature makes them supremely appropriate for social work and educating youth⁴¹.

The essentialist argument of the superiority of women to men in the field of healing carved a public rhetorical space for female doctors in a public which traditionally opposed women’s paid employment:

The ideal woman should not be only a moral chalice for men, from which the man in his hour of crisis could gain strength and determination with trust, but also a centred individual, fulfilling in the life of the nation a profession that men are not able to fulfil⁴².

The debate whether women doctors were able to perform medical work outside the medical fields ‘suitable for women’ (especially caring) bulked large in public discourse.

The aristocrat Vilma Hugonnai (1847-1922) dared to nostrify her doctor's degree in Hungary though she had obtained it in Switzerland. The first two women however who gained a medical degree in Hungary were of Jewish origin – a fact not to be mentioned⁴³. By a self-legitimizing narrative they succeeded in giving importance to their biological difference as women: they could add a certain extra added value to medical work with respect to men.

That beautiful vocation, chosen by women with a view to serving humankind, should be fulfilled by every Hungarian medical doctor with female spirit, honour and proud self-confidence⁴⁴.

The mission for women doctors, invented for them and appropriated by them, was healing the wounds of the nation, while the dominant anti-feminist discourse was the discourse of difference, driving women back to the family. As Dr. Erzsébet Madarász, later married to Dr. Gönczi, wrote:

God created woman as mother, it is her the first and sacred aim to fulfil this duty... a new world is coming, and shaping this new world there is a big role waiting for women, especially as mothers, who in the present-day liberal world have been snatched from their homes, and through the fight for bread, the woman should be given back to the family⁴⁵.

The war played an important role in the advancement of women doctors as well as the changing perception of women's employment. In World War I, women first got employment as physicians, because the men were at the front. Some women, including the future leaders of the interwar Hungarian women's movement, also went to work in military hospitals. In World War II noble women were the stars of the press as traditional healers and as women performing their duty. As the manifesto of female doctors proclaimed in 1938:

You also know, and you have experienced how big a weapon convergence is and we, bread-winning women, we need that weapon badly! Help us not to let that weapon fall from our hands; let it stand there firmer than it was before⁴⁶!

Most of the women doctors used their maiden names as they were aware of the politics of naming. To use the name of their husbands immediately meant marginalization from the profession.

Women doctors formed two professional organizations that used different rhetorical frames to legitimize the admission of female doctors to public service via paid employment. The first one, the MOOE (Hungarian Association of Women Doctors), the Hungarian branch of the Medical Women's International Association, was formed in 1927. They defined their role as professionals who were equal insofar as they were professionals. They did not exclude Jewish doctors from membership and they did not use the argument of national necessity. In this context of increasing nationalism they failed to gain wider support with their politics of separation.



Fig. 4
Hungarian nurses with soldiers in Transylvania (War collection, private photo, Hungarian Photographical Museum, Kecskemét, No. 01440166).

The other organization, the women's section of the MONE (National Association of Hungarian Doctors), was a radical, extreme right-wing organization formed in 1929. As they declared, "advancement in closed and separated units does not hold out prospects of any favourable result"⁴⁷, so they excluded Jewish members. The extension of Hungarian territory as a result of being a wartime ally of Nazi Germany meant that the country faced a serious lack of medical professionals⁴⁸. This lack, which was made worse by military activity, was used by female doctors as an excuse to enter medical fields previously closed to them.

The female doctors of the MONE are consciously women and feminine in their capacity as doctors.... Day by day more male colleagues are dressed in military uniform. It is necessary that more medical fields be covered by female doctors⁴⁹.

This rhetoric of a useful mission was connected with state intervention and it was the state that determined who the "useful" citizens were. The definition of social citizenship was based on exclusion, and discrimination necessarily dragged women into the war effort.

As Dr. Gönczi (born Madarász), the head of the women's section of MONE, said in front of the people's tribunal for war crimes:

Because I am a doctor by profession, I am more sensitive to social issues...I was convinced that I could implement my social ideas only through political channels⁵⁰.

These political channels however were exclusively connected to the very thin line existing between the politics of difference and professional qualities. The popularity of the Hungarian Nazi party, the Arrow Cross, illustrates that rhetorical trap. According to a survey conducted in 1938, 60% of women with a higher educational degree felt discriminated⁵¹. The professional women's organizations tried to protect women from discrimination at work. The long list of professional women's organizations operating in Hungary in the interwar period shows that it would have been possible to form a professional pressure group working for this protection, which might have worked well⁵². However a kind of political solution was offered by the Arrow Cross Party with their anti-modernist emancipatory project which turned out to be very popular.

WOMEN WHO TRIED TO REDEFINE THE MEANING OF THEIR OWN WORK: FEMALE MEMBERS OF THE ARROW CROSS PARTY

The Hungarian Arrow Cross Party was born of a series of short-lived and marginalized groups and parties. The personal abilities and ambitions of Ferenc Szálasi united the different groups in September 1940⁵³. The mobilizational background of the Arrow Cross Party for women was very much connected to their experience during employment. It is worth pointing out that this party was founded as a part of the misogynist tendencies of inter-war Hungarian political life in which 'women', especially the 'New Woman' were represented as unpredictable and dangerous for the male hegemony in economic, political and cultural life. The aim was to cut back women's participation in public life after World War I, especially in education⁵⁴.

Antidemocratic modernization gave women new scope and they used it for individual projects while at the same time opposing and criticizing the feminists and the social democratic emancipatory project. As the ideologist, an organizer of the women's section of the Arrow Cross Party, said:

...we might look like feminists on the surface. We demand equal rights for ourselves with men. We are aware of the fact that this leads to equal duties. We do not accept that there is a different code of women's honour and men's honour. We should protest against the view that women's lies are forgiven because they are "pretty"...we should protest against the general belief that "women's talk" is not important⁵⁵.

As for the material used in educating the future female members of the Arrow Cross, it pointed out that the aim of the Hungarist woman was to reach "self understanding and self criticism". The systematic consciousness that arose during meetings was an

important feature of the movement which aimed at achieving equality. The area where equality was to be achieved was employment.

The first female members of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party were disappointed professionals⁵⁶. They were the first generation of employed women (typists, accountants), most of them migrating to Hungary as ethnic Hungarians fleeing from those parts of Hungary which were detached in 1919. These women did not have any other supporting social network beside the newly formed political movement of the Arrow Cross. They were mostly single and found that as employed women their professional and social mobility was hindered because of the semi-feudal character of the Hungarian political system. Due to their family background and their personal experience with the Republic of Councils in 1919 they could not join or trust trade unions because leftist thinking for them equalled being Jewish. The single lower-middle class professionals who were enthusiastic party activists were sometimes jailed for their beliefs but marginalized very quickly from the all-male party leadership. The role of women was defined thus by the Hungarist movement:

Women can move as free human beings in society but should respect those laws and moral ideas which are indivisible from the concept of love and duty towards the nation⁵⁷.

It was the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party which first submitted a law to the Hungarian Parliament banning sexual harassment at the workplace in 1938. Their agenda was to protect 'Hungarian' women who were forced by social misery to take up employment under 'Jewish' employers. The female members wanted to believe in the slogan of their Party:

In the Hungarian national economy full citizens have got the same rights and are equal and eligible for equal work; this works according to their capacities in production⁵⁸.

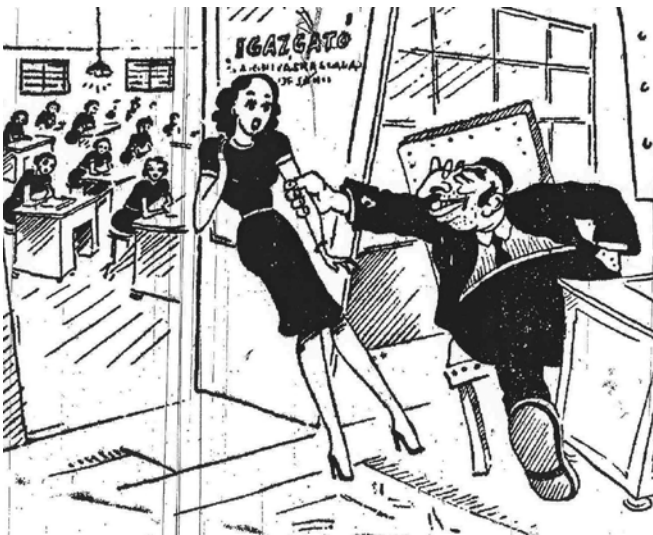


Fig. 5
Sexual harassment at the workplace (cartoon, "A Nép" 1938).

Such promised full citizenship for women was racialized citizenship. Equality was defined through sacrificing the concept of equality. However “women” were defined as strong and active. The Arrow Cross Movement was a counter-movement, whose members were imprisoned and ridiculed not only by conservative Hungary but also by the German Nazis. The movement was also a socializing movement, which prepared its members pending the moment for action. This moment came in October 1944, when the ill-fated attempt by Admiral Horthy to make Hungary copy the example of Romania failed and with it the Arrow Cross, as the Hungarian Quisling government took over in October 1944 and mobilized everybody: men and women alike for “nation protection” against the approaching Red Army⁵⁹.

CONCLUSION

The neo-conservative political elite of Horthy Hungary was caught in a trap as their conservative and antidemocratic political system was challenged by both the left and the right demanding major reforms in the electoral system. Meanwhile increasing female employment eroded the system of moral acknowledgements. The *Magyar Asszonyok Lexikona* [Dictionary of Hungarian Women] listed women who gained their social status as a result of their university education and their success in paid employment. The change in women's employment came about in a very short time: in a decade female doctors, chemists and teachers were employed in places where no women had been employed before. The lack of a reference group called for the application of a specific ‘rhetorical construction’ which steered a midway course between the politics of equality and the politics of motherhood⁶⁰. The inevitable rightwards shift by the professional women's organizations proved that this was a failure. After 1945, women's mobilization for the labour force was again only possible on the basis of a specific ‘mission project’: building up socialist Hungary. The de-sacralized mission rhetoric of ‘statist feminism’, however, would prove far from being able to deliver the promised equality⁶¹.

NOTES

- ¹ More on this in P. Joyce, *The Historical Meanings of Work: an Introduction*, in P. Joyce (ed.) *The Historical Meanings of Work*. Cambridge 1987, pp. 31-64.
- ² A. Pető, J. Szapor, *Women and the Alternative Public Sphere: toward a Redefinition of Women's Activism and the Separate Spheres in East Central Europe*, in “NORA, Nordic Journal of Women's Studies”, 2004, 3, pp. 172-182.
- ³ On the history of women's work in 19th-century Hungary see A. Fábri (ed.), *A nő és hivatása. Szemelvények a magyarországi nőkérdés történetéből. 1777-1865* [The woman and her profession. Excerpts from the history of the women's question in Hungary], Budapest 1999.
- ⁴ N. Yuval Davis, F. Anthias, *Gender, Nation, State*, London 1989, p. 7.
- ⁵ K. Passmore, *Femininity and the Right: from Moral Order to Moral Order*, in “Modern and Contemporary France”, 2000, 1, pp. 55-69, esp. p. 56.

- ⁶ More on conservative women's politics in M. M. Kovács, *The Politics of Emancipation in Hungary*, in A. Pető, M. Pittaway (eds.), *Women in History-Women's History: Central and East European Perspectives*, CEU History Department Working Paper Series, Budapest 1994, pp. 81-89.
- ⁷ J. Herczeg, *Jótekonny magyar asszonyok a világháború előtt. Szokolay Kornélné feljegyzései* [Charitable Hungarian Women Before the War. Records of Ms.Sz.K.], Budapest 1930, p. 5.
- ⁸ B. Papp, *A diplomás nők Magyarországon. A Magyar Női Szemle (1935-1941)* [Women with Higher Educational Degrees (1935-1941)], Szakdolgozat [MA Thesis], Budapest 2004, pp. 61-62.
- ⁹ Gy. Gortvay, *A kereső nő szociális helyzete és munkaviszonyai* [Position and Employment of Breadwinning Women], Budapest 1930, p. 1.
- ¹⁰ See this argument in the literature: J. Gergely, *Hivatás vagy robot (A dolgozó leány)* [Mission or Slavery. The Working Girl], Budapest 1934, and E. Sz., *Hölgytársaságban* [In Female Company], in "Tüzhely", 1 September 1933, p. 15.
- ¹¹ *First speech* by Margit Slachta in *Slachta Margit az első magyar nőképviselő politikai működése* [The activity of Margit Slachta, the first female MP], Budapest 1935, p. 22.
- ¹² For a comparative perspective see V. De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, Berkeley 1992; R. Bessel (ed.), *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Comparisons and Contrast*, Cambridge 1996.
- ¹³ E. Fiers, *Harc a belső ellenséggel* [Fight against the enemy within], in *Beszámoló a MANSZ kongresszusáról 1940. március 7-12* [Report on the Congress of the HWWA: Hungarian Women's National Association], Budapest 1940, p. 94.
- ¹⁴ Revanchism was rejected by the Feminist Association which occupied a pacifist standpoint in collaboration with the International Women's League for Peace. Pacifism isolated the Hungarian feminists from most of the Hungarian population who considered war to redefine the borders as a cruel but unavoidable task. The Communist Party also rejected militarism on the basis of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism.
- ¹⁵ *Pártok, egyesületek 1933 karácsonyán* [Survey on parties and associations at Christmas 1933], in the Hungarian National Archive (MOL) K 149-1934-7, 161, cs. p. 38.
- ¹⁶ S. Raffay, *A magyar nő hivatása* [Mission of Hungarian Women], in *MANSZ almanach 1920* [Almanach of HWWA in 1920], Budapest 1920, p. 63.
- ¹⁷ *MANSZ almanach 1920* [Almanach of HWWA in 1920], Budapest 1920, p. 52.
- ¹⁸ For more on this see: A. Pető, *Kontinuität und Wandel in der ungarischen Frauenbewegung der Zwischenkriegsperiode* [Continuity and Change in the Hungarian Women's Movements in the Interwar Period], in U. Gerhard, *Feminismus und Demokratie. Europäische Frauenbewegung der 1920er Jahre*, Königstein 2001, pp. 138-159.
- ¹⁹ See Pető, *Kontinuität und Wandel* cit., pp. 138-159.
- ²⁰ Joyce, *The Historical Meanings* cit., p. 4.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ²² For more see M. Maskiell, *Embroidering the Past: Phulkari Textiles and Gendered Work as "Tradition" and "Heritage" in Colonial and Contemporary Punjab*, in "The Journal of Asian Studies", 1999, 2, pp. 361-388, p. 363.
- ²³ Setina Ilona Sebestyén, *Magyar asszony-magyar munka* [Hungarian woman, Hungarian work], in *A magyar asszony háziipara. A MANSZ 1926. évi miskolci országos háziipari kiállítása alkalmával* [The domestic industry of the Hungarian wife. For the occasion of the national domestic industrial exhibition in 1926 in Miskolc], Miskolc 1926, p. 2.
- ²⁴ Dezsőné Szenteh, *Székelly asszony-magyar asszony* [Sekler woman-Hungarian woman], *ibid.*, p. 17.

- ²⁵ C. Tormay, *Anonymák krónikái* [Chronicles of Anonyma], in *A magyar asszony háziipara. A MANSZ 1926* [The domestic industry of the Hungarian wife] cit., p. 2.
- ²⁶ K. Szőke, *A miskolci háziipari kiállítás* [The Miskolc exhibition of domestic labour], seminar paper, Miskolci Egyetem, Történelem Tanszék [University of Miskolc, Department of History] 2006. Thanks to Kornelia Szőke for sharing her research results with me.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Dezsóné Szenteh, *Székelly asszony-magyar asszony*. [Sekler woman-Hungarian woman.], in *A magyar asszony háziipara. A MANSZ 1926* [The domestic industry of the Hungarian wife] cit., p. 17.
- ²⁹ Joyce, *The Historical Meanings* cit., p. 13.
- ³⁰ For more detail: "Magyar Jövő" [Hungarian Future], 2 May 1926.
- ³¹ Joyce, *The Historical Meanings* cit. p. 23.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ³⁵ More on this in N. Cselőtei, *Transformation in Body Politics in Interwar Hungary*, MA Thesis, Central European University, Budapest 2000.
- ³⁶ More on redefinitions of citizenship in Pető, Szapor, *Women and the Alternative* cit., pp. 172-182.
- ³⁷ Fiers, *Harc a belső ellenséggel* cit., p. 94.
- ³⁸ R. Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichte and Social History*, in *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Cambridge, Mass. - London 1985, p. 74.
- ³⁹ More on this strategy of appropriation in A. Pető, *Napasszonyok és Holdkisasszonyok. A mai magyar konzervatív női politizálás alakzatai* [Women of the Sun and Girls of the Moon. Morphology of Contemporary Hungarian Women Engaging in Politics], Budapest 2003.
- ⁴⁰ Papp, *A diplomás nők* cit., p. 132.
- ⁴¹ E. Kokas, *A nők szerepe Olaszország államépítő munkájában* [The role of women in statebuilding in Italy], in "MONE", August 1942, 1, p. 88.
- ⁴² E. Matej, *Az új nőideál* [The ideal new woman], in "Az orvosnő", 1938, 1, p. 6.
- ⁴³ E. Szarka, *Orvosnői identitások* [Identities of Women Doctors], in "Kút", 2005, 2, p. 135. Thanks to Eszter Szarka for sharing her research on women doctors with me.
- ⁴⁴ E. Kokas, *Az orvosnő* [The female doctor], in "Az orvosnő", January-December 1941, p. 89. About the social history of women doctors see E. Szarka, *Az Orvosnő (1938-1941)*, manuscript [n.d.].
- ⁴⁵ E. Madarász, *Az orvosnő feladatai* [Tasks of female doctors], in "Magyar Női Szemle", January-February 1935, pp. 10-14, quoted in Szarka, *Az Orvosnő (1938-1941)* [The female doctor 1938-1941] cit.
- ⁴⁶ *MONE orvosnői csoportjának felhívása a keresztény orvosnőkhöz* [Manifesto of the women's section of MONE to Christian women doctors], in "MONE", August – September 1938, 1, p. 124.
- ⁴⁷ "MONE", 1 December 1930, p. 161.
- ⁴⁸ There was a point in 1943 when they even thought about having Hungarian-Jewish doctors employed in Transylvania where the medical situation was dramatic, especially when the Romanian doctors emigrated; at least they spoke Hungarian. But this proposal was rejected in the end.
- ⁴⁹ *Beszámoló a MONE Orvosnők évzáró üléséről* [Report on the annual meeting of the women's section of MONE], in "MONE", 1 August 1942, pp. 85-86.
- ⁵⁰ Dr. Gönczi Aladárné testimony on 17 June 1945 in Archive of the Municipality of Budapest (Budapest Főváros Levéltára, BFL) 416, 45, p. 11.

- ⁵¹ Papp, *A diplomás nők* cit., p. 75.
- ⁵² e.g., Women with an Independent Profession, Association of Hungarian Female Shorthand Writers, Association of Female Clerks etc.
- ⁵³ More on this in N. M. Nagy Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others. The History of Fascisms in Hungary and Romania*, Stanford 1970.
- ⁵⁴ More on this in Pető, Szapor, *Women and the Alternative* cit.
- ⁵⁵ Józsefné Thoma, *A hungarista nő hármias feladatköre* [The Three Tasks of Hungarian Women], Archive of Institute of Political History (PIL) 685. f. 1. 4. p. 14.
- ⁵⁶ Analysis of female defendants before the Budapest people's tribunal see: I. Barna, A. Pető, *"A csúnya asszonyok". Kik voltak a női háborús bűnösök Magyarországon?* ["Ugly women". Who were the female war criminals in Hungary?], in *"Élet és irodalom"*, 26 October 2007, p. 10, where in comparison with the census of 1938 the over-representation of intellectuals is remarkable.
- ⁵⁷ "Hungarista nép" [Hungarist Nation], 11 July 1938, p. 3.
- ⁵⁸ "A Hungarista út" [Hungarist Way], 8 July 1938, p. 3.
- ⁵⁹ K. Schrijvers, A. Pető, *The theatre of historical sources. Some methodological problems in analyzing the post World War II extreme right movement in Belgium and in Hungary*, in B. Waaldijk (ed.), *Professions and Social Identity. New European Historical Research on Work, Gender and Society*, Pisa 2006, pp. 39-63.
- ⁶⁰ B. Sipos, *"Asszonyfejjel férficélokért". Olvasatok és ábrázolások egy újkonzervatív korszakban* [Using women's heads serving the aims of men? Readings and representation in a neo-conservative period], in M. Palasik, B. Sipos (eds.), *Házastárs? Vetélytárs? Munkatárs? A női szerepel változása a 20. századi Magyarországon* [Partner in Marriage? Rival? Colleague? Changes of women's roles in 20th century Hungary], Budapest 2005, p. 34.
- ⁶¹ For more see A. Pető, *Hungarian Women in Politics 1945-1951*, Boulder - New York, 2003.

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